

CONVOY AWAY!

By Walter Davenport

From the first locomotive to the last aspirin tablet, everything's in its place. 300,000,000 dead-weight tons of shipping space are packed to the last cubic inch, and the convoy sails on time. It's a miracle of efficient organization, and here's how it happens



A convoy of merchantmen steaming into line. Planes soar far and wide above; destroyers and cruisers knife ahead and around them, listening and watching for enemy subs

WE ARE far down Lower New York Bay, sitting in the bow of a Maritime Commission cutter, feeling pretty small and inadequate. We have made a lot of silly, awed notes about beauty and power and hugeness. Presently, with excellent judgment, we throw these notes into the water and just sit there, looking north from Sandy Hook Bay at hundreds of ships "full and down," their prows turned seaward, their anchor chains taut in the tide.

Full and down? That means merely that your ship is crammed to the last inch of her cubic capacity and is down to the Plimsoll line that marks the safety limit of submergence.

Soon the sun will go down beyond Raritan Bay and Arthur Kill. There will be the iron song of chains reeled up through hawseholes. From Jamaica Bay, a fleet of warplanes whiskered with machine guns and cannon will loaf easily over the ships, turn east; and slowly the armada that's bedazzling us will move into the ocean bound for England, for Russia, for the Mediterranean. Maybe they'll be joined by ships out of Boston, out of Halifax. They're degaussed and depermed against U-boats and mines. They're jumboed with heavy booms that swing their cargoes in and out again. They're packed with ten thousand things from sewing needles to General Sherman tanks, from chewing gum to landing barges, P.T. boats and fighter planes.

Once at sea they'll form ranks as precise as a West Point review. Swarming planes will soar far and wide above them, watching the seas for omens and signs of the enemy's subs. Ahead of them and all around, destroyers and cruisers will knife through the waters listening, watching, protecting.

Convoy Away!



Planes, minus propellers, wing tips and tail assemblies, are lashed to the trundle deck of the tanker sails without this extra deck cargo

From the Atlantic to Yonkers

This is what they call a Convoy Party. As we behold it in the light blue haze, tankers and Liberty ships, it looks like a huge cornucopia, its vast mouth yawning at the Atlantic, its body winding up through the Narrows between Fort Wadsworth and Fort Hamilton, up through the Upper Bay and on up the North River as far as Yonkers.

No scientist in his laboratory, no physicist at his books and gadgets works with greater exactness than the men who cargoes this vast array of ships. If one of these holds lacks one inch of being "down to her marks" when loaded, she is fifty-seven tons short of her ideal burden. And when you strike an average of the capacity of all the merchantmen in a convoy, from the burly Liberty ships to the ugly little tub that used to carry bananas, you'll find that if eighty ships were off that inch, it would be as if a ship were missing.

On every deck of these wallowing monsters that carry the fuel for the planes, which are wiping Hamburgs and Bremens off the face of the earth, are planes lacking only propellers, wing tips and tail assemblies.

Early in 1942, Admirals Land and Vickery decreed that somehow fighter planes and light bombers, unable to cross the ocean on their wings, must arrive in foreign parts ready to fight. They knew that it would be done. That's why they had men like Captain Granville Conway, supervisor of the Atlantic Coast region for the War Shipping Administration.

Britain said that it couldn't be done. Britain had tried it. Planes had been lashed to tankers, but by the time they reached their destinations, they had been battered by the bashing seas that broke over the low freeboards.

Of course, planes could be sent crated, knocked down, but reassembling them would take days and weeks. Moreover, there were always parts which had been carried on to other ports or which might still be sitting on a Jersey pier.

A New Type of Superstructure

But presently, Conway and his men began building a skeleton superdeck on tankers. It looked like something your small son might have contrived out of that box of metal structural parts which you gave him for Christmas. It's merely a steel-and-wood openwork deck superimposed upon the tanker's topside. It rises seven or eight feet above the deck, fifteen or sixteen feet above the water line.

On this trundle deck, out of reach of the wrecking seas, are lashed fighters and bombers too light to fly the ocean alone. All that's needed are the wing tips, the tail assemblies and the propellers, and the plane is ready to take off. No tanker or Liberty ship leaves without carrying assembled planes, tanks or P.T.'s on deck.

Convoy Away!

It's getting close to sailing time. The crews become noisier, their officers quieter. The crews are already talking about what they're going to do with their money when they get back from this trip.

These crews are well paid—and they ought to be. Ordinary seamen average \$82.50 a month; able-bodied seamen a hundred. Bosuns get \$112.50, messmen \$82.50, chief cooks \$132.50, chief stewards \$147.50. All that's base pay. All hands get a hundred per cent bonus for voyages in certain dangerous areas and additional bonuses for passing through restricted areas where the risk is particularly high.

But the thing for us to do first is to sit in with the men who load the convoys. They're all men who have done nothing with their lives but stow cargo into ships—Captain Conway, Captain Hewlett Bishop, Captain Martin Goodman.

Before they begin to load a ship, they know precisely where each crate, bale, box and package belongs. Before a stevedore or dock walloper spits on his hands, they have doped out on paper the place for every one of the thousands of items a ship will carry. When they're through loading a ship with locomotives and trucks, medical supplies and binoculars, you'd have quite a time of it finding space for a packet of phonograph needles.

When we get to the Maritime Commission offices, William J. Darcy is conferring with a group who know all about shipping Lend-Lease stuff to the United Kingdom, to South America, to the Persian Gulf, the Near East and India. They're Nick Larsen, Arne Olesen, Henry Geib and a few others. You can listen if you want, but it won't get you anywhere. A spy would have a bad time of it at that conference. They're talking of a shipment of Elegant to January—something or other to some such place. You'll hear a lot about such commodities and places as Tango and Rumba, Little Joe and Dark and Handsome, Zoot Suit and Groove, Sweet Sue and Mamma. It all means something—but not to you.

Conway, Goodman and Bishop move in. The phone rings, and Bishop takes it. He doesn't say much except "Yep . . . Yep. Can do . . . Okay"—and very little of that. The other end of the line hasn't wasted any words, either. After all, it's only a minor chore. Fighter planes are needed at Kitty and they've got to be at Kitty by Nonesuch. Bishop who, they say, could load a ship with loose projectiles and uncrated eggs and not lose an egg, gets on another phone, double-talks to somebody, says "Okay," hangs up and bends back toward Darcy. Those planes will be at Kitty by Nonesuch.

Easy? Well, yes—to these guys. All it means is that several cargoes will have to be shifted from this ship to that, several railroads will have to unload and reload about fifty cars, several parts plants and depots will have to revise tomorrow's schedules. But everything will be all right.

Computing Tomorrow's Cargoes

It's long after sunset. Those ships we saw in the bay have gone. Inbound merchantmen and tankers, riding high with half-empty holds, have filtered in. They've tied up to docks from Tottenville on Staten Island or Hoboken and Weehawken on the Jersey shore, from Bay Ridge and Gowanus in Brooklyn to Manhattan's toothy river fronts. Within four or five hours, these men of Conway's will have weighed and measured millions of tons of tomorrow's cargo. And it will be errorless computation down to the last cartridge and K-ration.

Conway's telephone rings. The government of Brazil needs 1,822 tons of steel—Lend-Lease. Conway doesn't know what Brazil wants it for, and nobody could possibly care less. He merely says that the steel's coming up, or words to that effect, and passes the information along to somebody down the corridor. In an hour, he receives neatly typewritten intelligence that

4 Convoy Away!



"YOU BET I'M GOING BACK TO SEA!"

Register at your nearest U.S. Employment Service Office

U. S. MERCHANT MARINE

War Shipping Administration



MAN THE VICTORY FLEET

U. S. Merchant Marine recruiting poster (1942)

a steel company is on the job, that the order has been placed in the name of the Brazilian Purchasing Commission, that Cargo Control has issued a forwarding authorization to the Treasury's Transport Division, that the Army Quartermaster has signed all the many necessary papers making it simple for the Treasury to tell the proper railroads to speed 1,822 tons of steel to Snowball after which Castor Oil will be on its way to Crutch on Infidel by Lollipop.

Your onlooker senses may be reeling, but that's just the beginning. Here come complications. Not that they last long. The steel company is so busy with Nose-bag for delivery to Jehoshaphat by King Tut that Brazil can't get its steel for delivery by Lollipop. See? But the Chinese have a small stock pile of steel which isn't to be delivered until Lemonade. Therefore, the stuff is snaked out of the Chinese stock pile.

Soon thereafter, Conway learns that WPB, Lend-Lease, the Army, the Treasury and several other agencies are deep in the bookkeeping which will make everything okay. In no time, the Treasury Department has issued a certificate empowering Cargo Control, New York, War Shipping Administration to go ahead.

Our three big Lend-Lease customers—Britain, Russia and China—have their own shipping agencies in their own missions here. These agencies look after most of their own details, leaving Conway and his men nothing to do but stow the stuff into holds. For the others—the Dutch, South Americans, Australians, Spanish, Portuguese and so on—Cargo Control does about everything but foot the bill.

Occasionally (and certainly it is not the fault of Conway's men) things get lost somewhere between the manufacturer and the port of departure. That's where the Transit Inventory Division of the War Shipping Administration takes a hand. TID keeps an hour-by-hour checkup on Lend-Lease from, so to speak, the maker to the taker.

Thus the War Shipping Administration is never at a loss for an answer when asked what's been authorized, what's in the works, what's been shipped and where everything is at the moment. Nevertheless, TID's a tidy place, with no visible signs of agitation.

TID has never lost so much as a bolt. Once it took twenty-two weeks to find a couple of airplane engines which had got themselves lost.

Just before sailing time, the convoy skippers saunter in. They're briefed like bomber crews.

They listen, nod, shake their heads, shrug their shoulders. They say very little. They'd sail a tanker through hell and gone, and put the Devil in irons if he interfered. Some have been torpedoed once, twice, three times; and of course, some haven't

Convoy Away!

come back.

The way we're setting it down, it looks all too easy, too pat. That Convoy Party that left before our awed eyes was weeks in preparation. It was worked out on paper while some of the ships we saw were rounding South Africa, plowing up the Red Sea, creeping through the Mediterranean, dodging their way to Murmansk, zigzagging across the Atlantic or churning the Pacific. Ships due to sail away again, full and down, a fortnight hence, from America to God knows where, may now be hundreds of miles at sea. Their cargoes are now on the docks of Brooklyn, of Boston, of San Francisco.

Lengthening Our Supply Lines

The first World War saw nothing like this. Then our shipping problem was merely to France and back. Now the War Shipping Administration has the 17,000-mile trip to Australia and back to worry about. Before the Mediterranean was open to us, there was that little matter of 28,000 miles to the Persian Gulf and back. To-day they've got to supply our troops in the Aleutian Islands. In the Pacific, the lines of supply are getting longer and longer.

After the ship is, by all standards, full and down, you'll hear them talk of "free transportation." This free transportation is small compact stuff, light, soft stuff, that is wedged in between crates and bulkheads, between bales and the ship's sides. Millions of tons of free transportation which otherwise might have required ships of their own have thus been jimmied across the seas.

The schemes that Conway and his men have worked out to increase a ship's carrying capacity have made many ancient mariners agree that, until this war, ships were sailing the seas as empty as last night's bottle.

Cutting holes in bulkheads, for example, made it possible to carry more tanks below decks. Of course, cutting holes in bulkheads decreases emergency safety. But then, who the hell wants to be safe?

Collier's



OldMagazineArticles.com